

Lesson 8

GOD ALLOWS SUFFERING

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The longer one lives the more seriously that person thinks about life. Life is hard to understand and it often perplexes the human mind. One of the great mysteries is the problem of suffering and pain. Why do innocent people suffer? Why are babies born deformed? Why does a potentially great person die in his youth? Why the horrors of war, in which millions of soldiers and civilians have been wounded, blinded, maimed, raped and butchered? NOTE: If you have never asked yourself these questions, then-you are not thinking, for the intelligent person seeks some kind of answer to this dilemma of suffering.
- B. The stock answer of Christians for the existence of suffering is that it is a result of man's sinfulness. Man has brought evil upon himself. However, the problem is much more complex than the surface answer of man's sinfulness. The Christian who acknowledges the existence of a personal God finds the answer to the problem of pain and suffering in the secret, hidden counsels of a loving, merciful God. The objection, of course, is raised as to why a loving, sovereign God would permit suffering when He has the power to stop it. Logic would cause men to conclude that God is all powerful but not all good, and therefore does not stop evil, making God a tyrant, or that He is all good but unable to stop evil, in which case He is not all powerful, making Him a weak God. However, the Biblical position is that God is all powerful and is all good. NOTE: H.G. Wells, when looking over the miseries of Europe at war, said, "Either God cares and He does not have the power to stop this evil, or He has the power to stop it but He does not care." The Christian position is that God cares and God has the power but God has a plan which includes everything. His plan is the best plan and this plan ultimately brings the most glory to Himself. We accept this plan by faith even though we do not always understand it. We know we will understand the plan in eternity. POINT: We, as Christians, admit that we are finite and do not have all the answers for suffering, but we do have an infinite God who does have the answer, and we can trust Him.

II. EXPLANATION FOR THE EXISTENCE OF SUFFERING

- A. Introduction: There is a tendency by man to blame God for all suffering and to pass all responsibility for it to Him. However, the Bible almost always puts the responsibility for suffering on man, rather than God because suffering is general somehow related to man's sin. Yet we must not deny God's sovereignty or man's responsibility in the problem of suffering. NOTE: To speculate about the origin of evil is endless, but that evil exists is a reality and we must face it with objectivity.
- B. The Risk of Free Will: God knew the consequences of giving Adam and Eve a free will and decided the risk was worth it. Our first parents disobeyed God by an act of their free will, and the result was that they and the whole human race became sinners. Each member of the human race has ratified the rebellion of Adam and Eve. Man is a sinner who has deliberately, by his own free will, revolted against the loving Creator. Every man, because of the fall, has a will that is corrupted by sin. No man's will is free because it is enslaved to sin. A man is free to will but he always chooses against God and for evil. J.B., Phillips says, "Exercise of free choice in the directions of evil, in what we call the 'fall' of man, is the basic reason for the evil and suffering in the world." (*God Our Contemporary*). Human wickedness accounts for the great

majority of suffering among men. NOTE: The risk of free will was no threat to God's plan but was a threat to mankind. The consequences of disobedience made man a sinner and unable to choose for God and good. As a sinner, a person is totally responsible for all his actions.

1. Why didn't God make man so he would never sin? God could have made man so he would not have sinned but this would have made him a machine (robot) or a puppet. It would have robbed him of freedom of choice and he would cease to be human.
 2. Why doesn't God stamp out all evil and suffering? God has the power to annihilate all evil in this world if He chose to do so (Lam. 3:22). However, if God were to stop evil he would have to do a complete job. He would have to stop all evil and this would necessitate the destruction of the human race.
POINT: Men want God to stop the evil of war but not the evil of their own souls.
 3. Why doesn't God do something about evil? He has done something! God has sent His Son Jesus Christ to this world and is announcing to this world that all who will lay hold of Jesus Christ by faith shall be delivered from the guilt and penalty of sin (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). No man will escape God's judgment on evil except through Christ who came to die for sinful men. The ultimate answer for evil is found in the death of Jesus Christ for sin. NOTE: We know that God someday is going to wipe out all sin and suffering at the Second Advent of Christ. Until that time, evil is somehow working in God's plan to further His own ends.
- C. Punishment from God Because Of Disobedience: God does bring suffering and evil upon people for their rebellion to Him. Suffering may be the judgment of God for moral evil of men. Miriam, when she challenged the authority of Moses her brother, was struck with leprosy (Num. 12:9-10). In the case of David's adulterous sin with Bathsheba, God took the innocent child as a judgment against David (2 Sam. 12:15-18). Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead because they lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5). God does cause this kind of evil for it is suffering because of disobedience to God (Amos 3:6).
1. God rewards disobedience with suffering as seen in the captivity of Israel. Daniel acknowledged that God had taken the nation of Israel into 70 years of captivity with much suffering because of their rebellion to God (Dan. 9:5,12,14).
 2. God even brings war against men who turn from Him. Gideon asked why the Midianites were ravaging the country of Israel (Judg. 6:13) and the answer was that Israel had failed to obey God (Judg. 6:10). God also called the wicked, tyrannical Nebuchadnezzar "my servant" and his mighty armies brought horrible wars on Israel because of her disobedience (Jer. 25:7-9 cf. 30:15). NOTE: The obvious solution for suffering from the just judgment of God is to repent and do the works of God.
- D. Human Negligence: Man is responsible for his actions and because his actions are evil he brings much suffering upon himself. When men lie, cheat and steal, they are going to reap what they sow (Gal. 6:7). If a drunk hits another car and kills himself or others, the blame for these deaths must be placed on the man, not God, although this did not take place outside of God's hidden plan or secret will. POINT: The historical effects of sin takes its toll on humanity and there is great suffering because of it.
- E. Natural Calamity: There is also suffering that comes through natural events such as tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, fire, deformed children, disease, etc. It is much easier to understand suffering because of moral evil than suffering because of natural calamity. While the ultimate answer to this can only be found in the secret hidden

counsels of a sovereign God who does all things right (Gen. 18:25), there are some secondary reasons for suffering as the result of calamity,

1. The true God rules the world through natural law, and living in a world with natural law involves a risk. This is why men need to trust God, for they learn that behind the laws of nature are the laws of God who has all things under His control. NOTE: Ultimately the Christian retreats into the sovereignty of God when natural calamity occurs, for while he does not understand why, he by faith knows that this does not take place outside of His control. NOTE: The only option to believing that calamities are ultimately part of the plan of God is to believe that they happened by chance or accident. If calamities are by chance, then there is no design to life at all and the world about us becomes meaningless. It is a whole lot easier to humbly accept calamity in the sovereign purposes of God even though we do not understand, then it is to believe that calamity was an accident that happened by pure chance. There is no comfort in pure chance.
 2. Natural calamity may be the judgment of God and we fail to recognize it as such.
 3. Much of the results of natural disasters are sometimes compounded by man's refusal to heed warnings of tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, floods, etc.
- F. Glorification of God: Not all suffering is the result of divine judgment, for some suffering has been specifically designed by God for His own glorification. Such was the case with the man born blind (John 9:1-3). The disciples apparently thought that this suffering was caused because of sin (retribution theory). Jesus made it clear that the blind man's condition was neither the result of his sin or his parent's sin. This condition was designed by God that Christ might work a miracle in him.
- G. Satanic Activity. Satan is also a factor in causing much suffering on the planet Earth. We know that he is capable of instigating disease, war, depression, murder, immorality of all kinds, etc. NOTE: The Bible clearly tells us that Satan operates under divine permission. God allows him limited power as in the case of Job (Job 1:12; 2:6).

I. ANSWERS TO SUFFERING ARE FOUND ONLY IN GOD

- A. The Plan of God: God has reasons, purposes and plans beyond what any tiny finite man can see. God knows the beginning from the ending, for even though we now see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12), we can trust our God. We can only find peace to the answer of suffering when we say, "Even so, Lord, it seemed good in your sight," (Matt. 11:26). NOTE: Be careful to rest in the God of the plan as well as in the plan of God.
- B. Humility of Faith: As Christians, we must have a humble faith and admit that the problem of suffering is beyond us but it is not beyond God. Where reason ends, faith begins. NOTE: Men are not responsible for suffering they could not help, but they are responsible for their attitude towards the suffering. Whether suffering will be a blessing or a burden depends upon one's reaction to it. Those who by faith believe that God is somehow in control of the situation will rejoice. Those who see suffering as pure chance will grow bitter in the suffering.
- C. Proclaim Christ: We must tell men that Christ is the ultimate answer to all evil and suffering, and if the answer is not seen clearly in this life, it will be understood in eternity. Christ takes men to the Heavenly Father (John 14:6) who alone can comfort men in their sufferings.

II. THE EXAMPLE OF HABAKKUK: The prophet Habakkuk had the problem of why God permitted evil (suffering) as he saw Israel, the people of God, being defeated by the heathen armies of the Chaldeans led by King Nebuchadnezzar. Driven to his wits end by brutal facts, Habakkuk wanted to know WHY (Hab. 1:1-4 cf. 1:13). The prophet went to

the Lord with the problem even though he did not understand the why of the suffering (Hab. 2:1). He found that the ultimate answer to suffering was in God who does all things right and well even though we humans may not understand God's sense of justice, for our best sense of justice is corrupted by sin (Hab. 3:17-19). Habakkuk realized that he was responsible to God in and through the suffering even though he didn't understand it all.